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Title	'Technique and the Clash of Language: Some Thoughts on Tafuri's <i>The Sphere and the Labyrinth</i> '
Date	1990
Source	<i>Transition: Discourse on Architecture</i> , 32, pp. 6-21.

Technique and the Clash of Language: some thoughts on Tafuri's *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*

John Macarthur

I

The language of criticism

I read Manfredo Tafuri's methodological essay 'The Historical Project' in its first English translation in *Oppositions* in 1979.¹ It was an intriguing object which I had trouble comprehending. This was explained, so I thought, by the essay being the head severed from the body of the book *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, finally published in 1988. The essay promised a critical history which would 'descend into the interstices of techniques and languages' to reveal the political uses and determinations of architectural practice, and to show the responsibilities of the critic. In 1979 I took this descent (and the intonation of the names of post-structuralist theorists) to imply an evolution of Tafuri's position, and some correction of his constant recourse to 'the spirit of capitalist rationality' in his earlier *Architecture and Utopia*. However, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* is disappointing in this regard. The book has little of the topical and polemical usefulness of *Architecture and Utopia* and its theoretical elaboration seems merely that. Tafuri's descent from the clear skies of marxist determinism to the meticulous mapping of the surface of history, produces a body of facts and an argument for the consistency of his method, but no general vision by which one might begin to relate the problems of the present with those of the past.

The interstices into which *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* descends are those of the history of the 'negative avant-garde'. This history might be more familiar if named as 'dada-expressionism' and traced forward as the critique of the modern movement, and backward as eighteenth-century experiments with a pure architecture. The 'negativity' of these groups is, at one level, descriptive of an oft-noted difference between a positive avant-garde which was optimistic about the construction of a future society and a millennialist avant-garde which was pessimistic about the present. But this difference is coloured by Tafuri's never explicitly stated theoretical concept of a 'negative thought'. This 'negative thought' will positively show the impossibility of progressive thought whilst in the capitalist phase of the dialectic of history.² Thus 'negative' has a laudatory value in Tafuri in that the negative avant-garde had the wit not to get involved in the other three disastrous strategies of thought about architecture. These were: a progressive ideology 'proposing a total seizure of the real', a utopian nostalgia for a lost completeness, and reform of the institutions which enact public space. Each of the three has failed, and in its failure progressively lost architecture its status. The essays which make up *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* are concerned with this history of necessary failures. They comprise a set of readings of the alignments of the avant-garde in Germany, the Soviet Union and America between the wars.

Tafuri's readings are accompanied by four re-presented documents of the period. These are intriguing supplements rather than evidence integral to the argument. Tafuri assures us that in the micro-politics of various groups and exhibitions in the Weimar republic (as dadaism splits into a 'liberation of objects' and the 'vitalist construction of a socialist man'), we are seeing the very physics of architecture. The wisdom of the negative 'wicked transgression' is demonstrated through comparison; between the false hopes for a management in the Soviet First Five Year Plan, and, the

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Thanks to W. Doyle, R. Hawker, The Architecture Theory Reading Group (University of Queensland) and K. Burns.

laissez-faire naturalism of the garden city movement.

Tafuri explores the origin of these 'adventures' of the early twentieth-century avant-garde in a section on Piranesi, and their trajectory in a section on the architecture of the 1960s and 1970s. Tafuri traces in Piranesi's work the genealogy of a pure, fictional, refusal of the real which is then re-examined in Eisenstein's appropriation from Piranesi of a theory of montage. From de Sade Tafuri garners the idea 'L'architecture dans le boudoir' for his remarks on the 1970s. Here it seems the architects we must love to hate (*vis à vis* de Sade) are those like Peter Eisenman who empty all referents from the modernist tradition in an hysterical but somehow rigorous deployment of 'enigmatic fragments'.

With themes of this size, an elaborate theoretical tool-box and impressive scholarship, great hopes might be had for advice to take away, but *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* consistently frustrates such hopes and even pleasure in reading. It is not just that Tafuri is obscurantist and has a shifting terminology, for *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* is an improvement on the popular *Architecture and Utopia*. Tafuri's undoubted faults as a writer have always added the gloss of a 'demanding-ness' to texts which, when they are not turgid, are often evocative, daring and sometimes incisive. However, the lasting frustration of the book is its methodology. The 'interstitial' analysis which ten years ago sounded so attractive as a methodology is deliberately difficult to read. Some pages scan like the book's index with upwards of twenty proper names, most of them impressively obscure. Tafuri seldom hints which larger historical constructs we are in the interstices of. Aware of the pit-falls of a positivist history, he does not construct a taxonomy of avant-gardes, or rather he will not definitely fill out the taxonomic structure suggested by the introduction. It is obviously an illusory history to identify completely one group as institutional entryist, another person as embodying Nietzsche's laugh. But it is a useful illusion I would say, for the alternative as revealed by Tafuri is for the reader to suppose the classification and take the blame for syncretic historicism while the book splits into empirical research on one hand and fractious theorising on the other. However, there is a sort of rough-trade romance in this writing exemplified by the importance Tafuri gives to the anxieties of metropolitan life as described by Simmel or Benjamin. A hierarchy of exegesis and argument might have been forged if Tafuri had delineated larger historical constructs, but for him these can have no clear figuration. They are crowds which jostle and buffet the reader. Tafuri would doubtless hold that there is a place for histories which refuse to form queues, which speak in guttural languages and which shove their elbows in your face.

If Tafuri creates frustration with a 'theoretical' history which behaves like an empirical account without discipline, he has only his own methodology to blame. There is, however, a further problem of the book's topicality for which we cannot hold Tafuri at fault. *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* is in danger of appearing out-dated (although I think that many of its questions are perennial so that it cannot be dismissed for long). Written in the 1970s the book adheres to the centrality of the avant-garde's 'destruction of history' as advertised in Tafuri's *Histories and Theories of Architecture*. Tafuri holds that the modern movement's abstinence from historical research is the most significant historical influence on the present and thus it forecloses any historicist strategy for us.³ Tafuri would claim we must still *live* this destruction of history rather than console ourselves with a false historical incorporation of the twentieth century which threatens to be completed before it has concluded.

We can not blame Tafuri for not having predicted that in the later 1980s, actual success would accompany the conceptual failings of Post Modernism, that its pluralism would allow it to be both diaspora and institution. With the premature valorisation of twentieth-century history, the avant-gardes have entered the great pattern book of history and the theory of avant-gardism is less interesting than it was. Tafuri's supposition that Modernism maintained itself by creating a perpetual state of crisis has not been proved false by the collapse of that sense of crisis. On the contrary. But the collapse of the crisis, and the rise of an orthodoxy on the same foundations has had the unfortunate effect of casting Tafuri's analyses in a light less critical and more 'historical', that is, susceptible to appropriation.

However, the unforeseen success of gross historicism does less damage to Tafuri's position than the subtle blurring of criticism and design which has occurred in the last decade. It is the uptake of Tafuri's work in design schools which more than anything else has created an expectation that good design will have a 'theoretical' dimension. For Tafuri a design might be 'theoretical' in that it reveals the necessity of its own failings. But whether it is useful that designs should do this as well as critics like Tafuri is another question. There is some irony in this. Tafuri's diagnosis has encouraged his patient to take an interest in medicine.

Books such as *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* offer to take a problem from the field of practice and make it visible, produce it as an object. But nowadays design claims to do this for itself. Design is now supposed to be able to project present theoretical problems as objects which will exist in the future. What is the discount on the projective power of words when design can make a projective criticism? One of the ways Tafuri attempts to characterise our historical impasse is by distinguishing between techniques and languages, between procedure and meaning, but this is exactly the *différance* which we are currently being asked to consider not as a problem but as an architectural programme. Tafuri says in *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* that deconstruction can show how to pull things apart, but leaves the problem of who will put things back together, of what 'the historical project' might be. What must Tafuri think of a 'deconstructivism', now that Tschumi can package the 'pulling apart' of building as the 'putting back together' of architecture, now that Eisenman wins praise as a writer?⁴

II

From power to language

The Sphere and the Labyrinth in many ways attempts to specify matters which were enigmatic in *Architecture and Utopia*. While the earlier book was at pains to show that power necessarily bore on architectural practice, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* attempts to specify the mode of this determination. Although there are issues of incompatibility between the two books, we can take it that what power does is to distort the 'language' of architecture. Tafuri seems to assume, without argument, the ancient analogy between architecture and language. It is therefore difficult to follow his elaborations of the idea, but I believe he performs two significant moves. The first of these is his usage 'architectural writing', by which he refers to buildings, building designs or text produced by architects. This seems to evoke Jacques Derrida's privileging of writing over speech and a consequent image of language as being to do with construction rather than expression. The word 'writing' might also have a role to play in supplanting the older opposition of language as poetry or rhetoric which lay behind much architectural semiotics of the sixties.

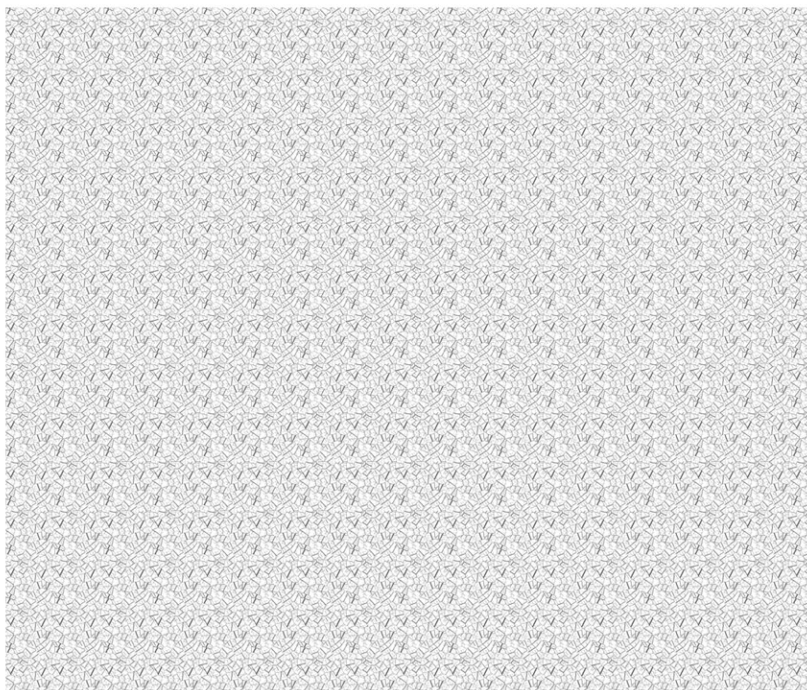
The second specification of the language analogy is an opposition between language and technique, and this is connected with questions of power. Indeed for Tafuri the point of such theoretical tools is their role in revealing the mechanisms of power. The architectural critic should expose the mechanisms by which capitalism deploys itself in social space. *Architecture and Utopia* achieved some notoriety for its assertion that a political architecture was impossible to construct in advance of a social revolution. What was possible Tafuri claimed was a class critique of architecture, 'a refusal of ideology' which might well spell the death of architecture itself. If architectural practice of a responsible sort was declared impossible, *Architecture and Utopia* claimed to make things wonderfully clear for architectural historians. Developments in architecture are totally determined by the progress of capitalist rationality. Architecture of a 'utopian' sort has been necessary to capitalism for certain regional reorganisations, and architecture of an ideological sort has been useful in constructing a false consciousness of the tolerability of cities. But increasingly capitalism does not depend on territorial organisation and is no longer interested in making and controlling cities. The history of architecture is a story of working out ways of construing the contradictions, threats, and shocks of the city as an aesthetically 'demanding' and challenging experience, and the lesson of history is that as cities become less central to the mode of production so architecture becomes irrelevant. Tafuri's is a marxism of pleasing bleakness.

What *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* adds to this story is a description of what happened to the culture of architecture, its language[s] during this long history of sycophancy and betrayal:

...it becomes evident that the reduction of formal writing to a "conventional game", to an object completely autoreferential, is the outcome of a crisis of language that views the city no longer as a "sickness" to be cured but as a privileged site for experimental formalisation. [p.149]

Let me recapitulate. The good 'formal writing' of architecture is thrown into crisis by its bad role-playing at techniques of cultural domination, that is, by its attempts to grease the axles of the ideology of industrial capitalism. Architecture has failed in this historic task and in order to maintain some simulacra of 'formal writing' it now excludes all reference to its failure, that is all reference, thus producing a degree-zero architecture. It is this empty silent architecture (Rossi, the New York Five) which Tafuri spares from his contempt, not because it is, or could be, the good formal writing, but because it has not let itself be turned into a bad technique and because it knows the tragedy of history.

Generally the language/technique opposition can be read as an avatar of the nature/artifice distinction with an account of power added. Languages are autonomous and omni-directional whereas techniques are efficient instruments of some intent and this for Tafuri is the spirit of capitalist rationality. Architecture wants to make and speak its authentic and natural languages to and for itself, but power comes along and puts the talk of architecture to various unsavoury uses. Distinguishing between techniques and languages then becomes the vehicle for the critique of capitalism. But in the story made up of these conflicting interests it is the conflict which is interesting and which reveals most. Thus what we know of architectural languages we know from observing the positive avant-garde's attempts to persuade capitalism that



Parade through the streets of Berlin on the occasion of Ivan Puni's exhibition, with costumes by Puni, 1921. Source: Manfredo Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*.

architecture is capable of use. Less naïve is the negative avant-garde whose strategic critique of bourgeois culture is also a search for places to hide and preserve the treasures of architecture from the mill of history. Tafuri's précis of the book in these terms is this:

The themes which weave in and out of this design are, we believe, evident: at the beginning, the discovery of "transgression" and of formal writing as a perverse excess, as the subject's voyage beyond the columns of Hercules, beyond codified limits; then, slow taking over of a "language of transgression", the realisation that the subject's freedom was merely "freedom for techniques", rather than freedom for writing. [p. 21]

To risk a gross identification I think that the discoverer of 'transgression' is Piranesi who thought to predict and critique the self-interest and alienation of urban life. The Dadaists reach the understanding that this critique is not actionable in the real space of history but they will be the cartographers of bourgeois angst. The positive avant-garde attempt to speak or write a remedial architecture within the real space of the inter-war period and it is their failure which demonstrates that the freedom to rebuild Europe is no freedom at all, for modern Europe was not built of architectural statements but of technical solutions to problems defined by power. In any case the

job was a nightmare of inadequate resources and in the 1960s architecture takes the blame for the destruction of the 'urban life', which it had tried to cultivate. Models of architectural thought: language, writing and techniques, themselves clash in the guise of strategies for damping down the great clash of history. Does one approach the disease, class war, and psychical disorientation of the industrial city with a strategy of control, irony or consolation? These alternatives are empty because they are unactionable. The meta-languages of the New York Five, Stirling, and such like, make a play with these early twentieth-century ideologies, which bear on less and less as the cities of Europe and America deindustrialise and become market places for the sale of an electronic leisure which abolishes space.

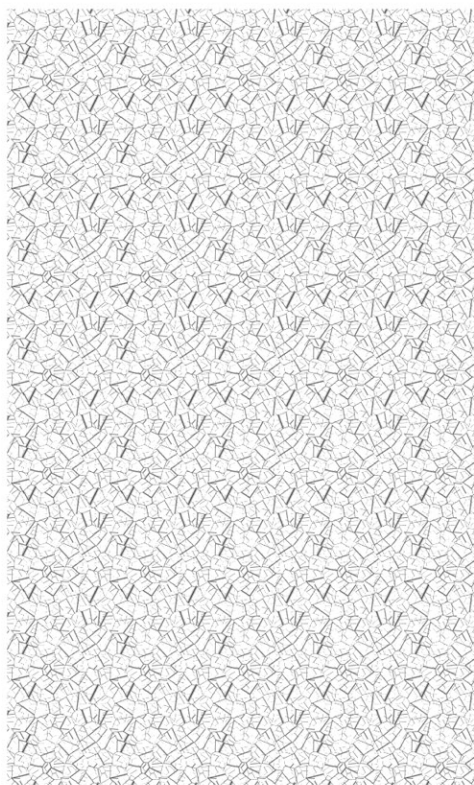
So what do we do with the many admirable ways we have invented of constructing a culture of urban experience? A set of ideologies which unfortunately failed in Paris, Moscow, Weimar, and Vienna and which seem to have no relevance to the present problems of Delhi and Seoul. Tafuri's answer must be that we have to wait for a total revolution and what architectural form a socialist society might have is beyond prediction.

III Foucault in the space of history

To maintain his rigorous bleakness against souring into melodrama, Tafuri needs to defend his vision of closed and total history against the various forms of leftist critiques of power which grew out of 1968. These critiques emphasised tactical and partial campaigns against cultural domination. Fredric Jameson has suggested to Tafuri that he moderate his palette with a hint of Gramsci, allowing architecture the possibility of maintaining its culture within an enclave.⁵ This would be nearly consistent with Tafuri's published position if we took it to mean that the strategy of the negative avant-garde might be allowed eventual success.

But the greater threat to Tafuri's position are 'post-marxist' theories of power, particularly those of Michel Foucault. Foucault holds that power is not singular but plural and must be analysed without recourse to concepts of agency, that is, the intents and interests of persons and institutions. Tafuri must therefore defend the epistemological primacy of the economic and the centrality of power, but also the idea of agency in technique. Foucault might almost agree with Tafuri that technique is what one has when a language or an ideology is emptied of reference and prepared for a generalised application. But for Tafuri the technique is then merely the naked face of capitalist rationality, coextensive with its purpose. For Foucault technique remains a tool, neutral and best described not by the intention of those who use it but by what it does. Examples are school examination or military drill. Such practices have effects, say in the economy of the labour time of the instructor, which open them onto a plethora of possible uses relatively disconnected with any intention in their invention and first use. Furthermore Foucault would not allow that power distorts a relationship in the construction of a technique. Techniques, by the vagaries of history, find their own destiny. Prison discipline, for instance, has in its history served a variety of contradictory interests within capitalism and the state but continues to maintain itself now in a situation where it is positively disfunctioning with regard to any interest but its own.

I think of planning as a particular architectural technique. It was developed by



Fernand Léger, drawings for *And Yet it Moves!* by Ilya Ehrenburg, Moscow-Berlin, 1922. Source: Manfredo Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*.

architects interested in producing irregular building profiles for scenic purposes in the late eighteenth century. Planning is a technique which we now use to a quite different end, to spatialise a brief, and which would have been incompatible with sixteenth-century concepts of the spatial disposition of a building. Tafuri would doubtless hold that the 'planning' which I am describing is the architectural response to capitalism's generation of more complex building types, but I think it more useful to conceive of the plan as having had a similar relation to 'architectural language' as the invention of the fork has had to cuisine. In part we should understand *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* as arguing against the obvious good sense of such a proposal of separate and intersecting histories within architecture by insisting on the identification of technique and language.

Tafuri argues explicitly against Foucault in the introduction to *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* and there he draws on *Il Dispositivo Foucault*, the proceedings of a seminar conducted in Venice in 1977. Tafuri's contribution 'Lettura del Testo e Pratiche Discorsive', offers to explain why 'the Foucault problem is important for us'⁶. In this seminar paper, and in the introduction to *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, one can observe Tafuri making some major corrections to the ideological analysis proposed in *Architecture and Utopia*. At the largest scale Tafuri now accepts that the powers with which he observes are not singular. There is no 'fit' between power and institutions, and

architecture consists in bundles of ideologies which can not be refused or confronted by analysis.⁷ Power is now defined as *practices* which are described independently of agency. Powers have procedures and techniques, limits and fissures which the analyst will map without recourse to the supposition of an intention in their enactment or of advantages won and lost. Tafuri no longer holds out the possibility of a program of demystification. Criticism has no advantage over other social practices in acting on ideologies.⁸ In this new 'style' of analysis Tafuri has learnt much from his readings in Foucault.

However, Tafuri does not take up certain Foucauldian postulates which would cast his own position into contradiction. Foucault can be taken to suggest that the analysis of power should begin at its extremities, as Foucault would say, at its capillaries, in the space between the techniques of discipline and conduct and the actual effects (often contingent) which they might have. Therefore Foucault opposes the 'juridico-discursive' model of power which would imagine practices of power to be enacted in a law-like way from a central position of sovereignty. This proposition entails rejecting suppositions of a prime determination by economic forms. Of course power is often practised with economic means, but Foucault could have none of Tafuri's 'capitalist rationality' a system which, like the sovereign, identifies and furthers its own interests thus enacting its trajectory over history. Concepts of ideology are also problematic because ideology is a concept of consciousness implying an identification or mis-identification of agency in social practices, whereas Foucault claims that we should critique the effects of practices in conduct and technique.

In *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, Tafuri continues to take his narrative from the development of the capitalist mode of production and to place the events of architectural history in relation to the ideological forms of consciousness of this central development. While *Architecture and Utopia* tended to suggest that for architecture the significant developments of capitalism were those with territorial consequences, in *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* he emphasises instead the division of concrete and abstract labour.⁹ This new focus need not be incompatible with the more 'vulgar' determinism of the earlier book and it licenses the 'interstitial' analysis of avant-garde factionalism through the idea that this functioned as a sort of competitive research into different strategies of intellectual labour. So although the horizon of architectural thought is still who can please the boss with the most effective ideology, the architectural ideologues actually work on 'techniques and languages'. For Tafuri the minute mapping of practices of power, in their dispersion, does not imply eschewing an overarching explanatory theory of the ultimate purpose of techniques of power. In fact Tafuri's question to Foucault is: what happens to analysis without such a map of its position and use? Has not Foucault's approach to power replaced a causal materialism with a metaphysics?

'Metaphysics' is not an uncommon complaint of Foucault based on some of his balder 'power is everywhere' remarks and his circumlocutions on the question of 'resistance'.¹⁰ But for Tafuri, who thinks capitalism omniscient and omnipotent, this is not the problem. The problem is that if one were to follow Foucault, (or other *nouveaux philosophes*) 'historical space' might well vanish. Historical space seems to mean two things for Tafuri. In *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* it means 'space for the historian'. Historical space is the workshop where the fragments resulting from the analytic process are reassembled with a purpose. It is the space housing the 'extra-linguistic series' without which analysis becomes a bottomless well, within the 'magic circle of

language', fascinating and deceptive.¹¹ 'Extra-linguistic' series is, I think, a circumlocution for 'event and causality'. At the general level of a plea for according a materiality to the processes of history, this complaint is not dissimilar to ones now being made of American deconstruction by Foucauldian new historicists and marxists alike. In architecture the point has been made convincingly by Mary McLeod that Post Modernism and Deconstructivism's focus on architectural language, and its supposed 'self-reference', has been marked by its near obverse, a progressive withdrawal from reference to the nature of programs, the administration of territory and the institutional agenda of the profession.¹² This is exactly the extra-linguistic series which Tafuri draws our attention to. He might be able to claim some perspicacity here, for McLeod would agree that it is the 'magic circle' of language which has mystified the history of the ten years since *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* was published.

For Tafuri the denial of historical space results in a poor intellectual practice where the analysis of languages competes with the critical role of the historian. But it is no mere methodological oversight that historical space is lost in the analysis of language. For language is not in itself the enemy of history or critique. Historical space has been lost because particular languages have become open to appropriation by power and degraded into mere techniques. It seems this happens in discourse, in the social use of language, where it is necessarily open to the uses of power. In 'Lettura del Testo e Pratiche Discorsive', Tafuri identifies a similar concept to the 'space of history' which he calls 'the space of conflict' and 'the space of the clash of languages'.¹³ 'Language[s]' for Tafuri might be any formalised system, such as writing, painting or architecture, in that they are 'put into discourse'. In Tafuri's reading of Foucault (which relies heavily on the transitional *The Order of Discourse*) power is immanent in the putting into discourse of a practice. Thus children's masturbation became the site of certain power relations only after it was embodied in a language of commentary and institutional referents.¹⁴ Tafuri's interest is in what he sees as the clash of such languages in the space of history. So for example, the architectural 'language' of the home and of institutions of cure might seem to be co-extensive with discourse on sexuality, but in fact have radical discontinuities. At the end of the eighteenth century the interests embedded in architectural discussions of dwelling are of a different nature to attempts by hygienists at co-opting the family through control of its setting.¹⁵ But what interests are furthered by the seeming coherence of such incommensurable interventions and commentaries, and how has this come about?

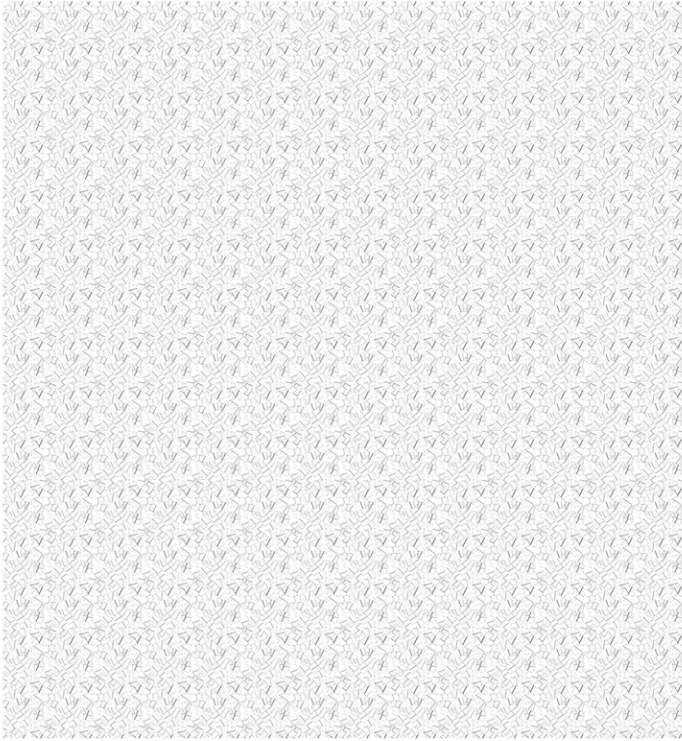
Tafuri takes the apparent coherence of different 'languages' to be that 'order of discourse' which Foucault describes societies as constructing for the purpose of 'warding off dangers' and the 'ponderous materiality of discourse'.¹⁶ Tafuri is happy with such an account because, I think, he reads 'the' order of discourse as singular, as a purposeful coherence of the superstructure, a cabal of lies, implying a direction if not an end. (In fact 'the' order is more like the mode of the ordering of discourse which Foucault will go on to call 'discursive formation', in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.) Tafuri also claims that Foucault's practice as a critic 'breaks powers', just as 'the putting into discourse' is an investment in power, so the work of the critic can break 'powers' as they appear to present themselves in a discursive, linguistic practice.¹⁷ It is true that Foucault claims to question the self-evidence of a language or discourse which arranges positions of commentary around an object or practice, but for him, it is not necessarily the case that the self-evident character of discursive regularities act in any interest, nor is their analysis a criticism, but rather a pure description. Tafuri's target is therefore a rather strange Foucault, an ardent critic of the linguistic manifestation

of power who yet refuses to collect his observations on its effects into a thesis on power itself. For according to Tafuri, Foucault reveals power as an unknowable heterotopia. That is, the powers which exist are heterogeneous even though they project the virtual image of a general power.¹⁸ For Tafuri this general power is not virtual but real. Tafuri picks up on Foucault's concept of heterotopia, a heterogeneous collection which contests order, perhaps because of its proximity to his concept of a negative avant-garde who contest the utopianism of the 'constructive' modernists, and attempt to destroy in advance the syntax of the language of an International Style. Thus for Tafuri, Foucault is in danger of merely repeating the pointed but ineffectual critique which the negative avant-garde had made. Only in 'historical space' will we understand the conditions of this failure. Tafuri asks; have not the negative avant-garde, from Velasquez to Magritte, each in their way, revealed and shattered the *episteme* which makes possible a discourse about their work?¹⁹ Why can not Foucault accept the political responsibilities of the analyst of works of the intellect which are themselves an analysis of their own conditions of possibility? It seems to me that with a sort of transference Tafuri has identified his own weaknesses in Foucault: a Foucault who will construct an endless commentary in marvelling at the self-fragmentation of history, a Foucault who feels no responsibility but to be the witness to rupture. What Tafuri wants Foucault to say, is what he himself would say: that when Magritte plays with the mutual incomprehensibility of reference and representation, the fracture is co-extensive with the artist/intellectual's relation to the mode of production. In disregarding Foucault's tactical historical constructs, (for example, *episteme*, such as the Classical Age or the modern world inhabited by the 'figure of Man') Tafuri accuses him of an analysis which would pore endlessly over the surface of the past and thus allow no space for history. This is in fact a fault of *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* where the 'historical space' guaranteed by marxism covers Tafuri's large and trackless analysis like a sky without stars.

IV

Technique and authenticity

The Sphere and Labyrinth is strongest at the points where Tafuri does make an account of the *techné* of architecture, of the conceptualisation of the ways of doing which must be our most tangible history. But the theoretical component of the book demands that these techniques are not objects but symptoms. Overall the book attempts a systematic reduction of such architectural techniques as planimetric montage or the ironic use of traditional semantics. These techniques are seen as the results of constraints and restrictions of which they become the sign. Tafuri should be read with a fair pinch of Foucault, the Foucault he seems to have ignored, who emphasises the contingencies and distortions in the uptake of techniques, and the trajectory of techniques of surveillance or of confession which can not be reduced to an intention in their first occurrence. By the end of the book when Tafuri critiques Eisenman's critique of Stirling's 'critical' quotations of the modern movement in the 1960s, it is hard to credit that all this is explained by which avant-garde faction invented (or thought that they had invented) the idea of dealing with the messy parts of buildings as *objet trouvé*. Surely the point must be the conditions of availability of such a technique, the different uses of which it is capable, the way in which its use might shed light on new techniques being developed. But no, if Tafuri supplies such a history of a technique it is in order to prove that an *objet trouvé* attitude to design was an attempt to get a handle on capitalist rationality sometime before 1931, that it got away, and that 'critical' architects such as Eisenman and Stirling show this in the semantic emptying



L. Baumann, montage of a cow, Krefeld, 1934. Source: Johannes Itten, *Design and Form*.

of their designs. In short Tafuri has difficulty getting in between techniques and languages because for him this is not so much a distinction as a litmus test for authenticity. 'Historical space' has allowed Tafuri to demonstrate which utterances show the distortion of 'the clash of languages', but this has the unfortunate effect of reducing his materialist account to questions of authenticity and the supposition of an essential architectural language.

Tafuri attempts to win a further advantage for his thought on languages, power and their analysis by having the concept of an 'order of discourse' resonant with the *ordo* of architectural classicism.²⁰

...architecture, techniques, institutions, urban administration, ideologies, and utopias converge in a work or a formal system only in the most felicitous moments — at least for the historian. Especially since the Enlightenment, this convergence has been called for by intellectual work, but only because the fragmentation of the classical *ordo* has dispersed and differentiated the diverse approaches to construction of the physical environment. [p. 13]

This statement implies a lost wholeness of architectural culture, a fullness which is

identified with the classical. Tafuri adamantly refuses nostalgia, but not without considering it, not without it having been possible. What has been lost is the happy marriage of signifier and signified.²¹ It seems that Tafuri's concept of architecture admits of a centrality where archetypal figures such as the sphere were innocent symbols, that is a natural milieu of reference without which architectural language becomes abstract and abstractable. Like many contemporary thinkers Tafuri insists that it is useless, now, to imagine a transparent language where signifier and signified have some natural and stable bond, nevertheless such a thing once existed. Once there was an architectural language which was not distorted by other determinants. But this language which was transparent to itself and opaque to power 'has been destroyed by history'.²² Instead of language we have languages, untranslatable except through the story of their fracture by power. The story of architecture's fall from grace is given the theme of Babel. This is not unfamiliar, indeed it seems inevitable that the architecture/language analogy will be put to this use. The notion that architecture has been constitutionally at odds with all developments in thought since the Renaissance has been around at least since Hans Sedgelymar's *Art in Crisis*: and is alive and well with essentialists such as Karsten Harries and Alberto Perez-Gomez.²³ Of course the materialist Tafuri would refuse the call to the centre as nostalgia. But it is disappointing to find that he does so, not because he disbelieves in centres, but because the historical moment, the revolution, has not yet taken place. Tafuri's praise for Dada could be taken to suggest that the cacophony of urban capitalism maybe an object of angst, but also a celebration, of the frisson of modern life, the present enemy not the past loss. But apparently not. Tafuri's 'clash of languages' evokes the anxieties of an inquest rather than a call to arms.

Capitalism is forcing the divorce of architectural signifier and signified, and Tafuri explains this as order being cuckolded by technique: 'It is true that every technique has a language and languages are not translatable between themselves'.²⁴ Thus if classicism was a transparent language it was so because it was married to order and refused the easy pleasures of technique, it was concrete thought without artifice. Our present problem is not only of the incommensurability of architectural languages, built and written, but that authentic intellectual labour has slowly been transformed 'into purely technical labor (abstract labor to be precise)'.²⁵ The history on which Tafuri focuses can thus be seen as that of a continuing experiment in finding a technical role for the architect, who maintains a traditional conception of her role only in the attempt still to speak the authentic language of architecture in the thick tongued argot of technical procedure. From the licence of praxis, of form and technique, architects strive to win a more intellectual relation of language and ideology, a 'concrete' description of their work and their necessity.

And if someone should point out that from time to time a gap can be perceived between the history which can be traced by following this continuous succession of themes and the forms of the architecture of the Modern Movement, we shall answer that this is the very gap that exists between avant-garde ideology and the translation into techniques of that ideology. [p. 21]

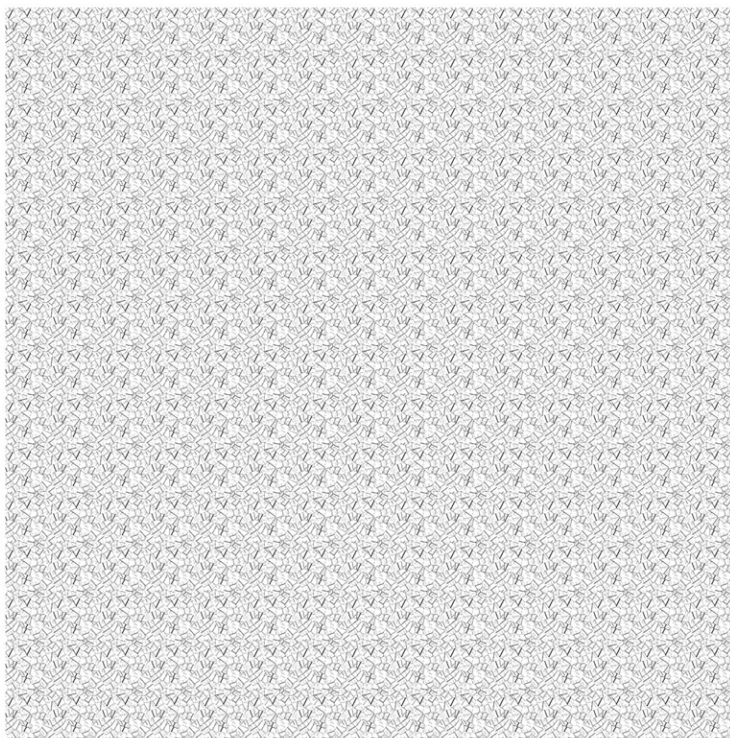
Here technique has come to stand for the effects blamed on it. It is an inauthentic representation and an inauthentic labour. As has been said so often what went wrong with Modernism was the cheap copies of the forms which did not register the content. With all the elaborate theoretical apparatus surely Tafuri can take us further than this?

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Giovanbattista Piranesi, the altar of San Basilio, detail, *Santa Maria del Priorato*, Rome, 1765. Source: Manfredo Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*.

Why is some architectural thought capable of institutional uptake and some of popularisation? In this account the easy metonymy by which technique can mean 'operative' and imply the mystified intentions of a technique-maker have reduced Tafuri's account of complex events such as these to simple issues of interest and blame.

Now whatever the degree of determination of technique by the advance of capitalist rationality this determination must fall on something, on some constraining material conditions. The strength of *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* is its detailed reading of the relation between architectural principles and the materiality of technical practices and the constraints and contingencies of their propagation. The book's faults begin with imagining such techniques as inadequate representations of a more essential architectural 'language' and then in proceeding to establish the whole analysis as many occasions of the distorting power of capitalism, the necessity of challenging it. This grand 'proof' runs over the argument which one could, and should, read the book, that it is: *the construction of technique is the point at which architecture and its relations to power can be made apparent. It is only at this point that there can be a 'critical' history of architecture. It is only on the occasion of the construction and reform of techniques that we can today contest power as architects.*

Tafuri would disagree. One cannot contest power as an architect. Capitalism determines the reach of the techniques which we construct, which we rename with our old words. Tafuri's view of the past as a place fractured and dispersed has not prompted any new program for making use of it, but rather seems to have raised his anxieties about the whole practice of architectural thought. What is architectural theory and what has it to do with the past? Tafuri's analysis seems designed to prove that the past can show us nothing.

But if you have difficulty fighting the erosion of architectural culture by the powers of today, is this fight so different from the *virtù* Alberti expected the architect to win from practice and which at the same time governed the ethics of that practice?²⁶ Should one not make such 'consoling' comparisons of conscionable practice today with what once was possible? At least such a comparison has a product, in the realm of architectural ideology if you will. And if such a new concept of *virtù* were to be produced in the discourse of the moment, despite the supposed impossibility of acting on it, this would only be possible because of an historical recovery of Alberti's specific concept of the ethical register of the architect's technique. I can not believe that Tafuri intends less. The distinctions made over the history of the avant-garde, between language and technique, procedure and reference are products in the present which are not exhausted by the uselessness of the past.

1 Manfredo Tafuri, 'The Historical Project', *Oppositions* 17, Summer 1979.

2 Tomas Llorens in his demolition of *Architecture and Utopia*, shows the loops which 'negative thought' has to turn in order to be both negative and the lesson we should learn from twentieth-century history. He sources Tafuri's 'negativity' through Massimo Cacciari to Nietzsche via Simmel. (Tomas Llorens, 'Manfredo Tafuri: Neo-Avant-garde and History', *Architectural Design*, 51, 6/7, 1981, pp. 83-95.) But it also seems apparent that Tafuri relies upon the 'negative dialectic' of Adorno, which (as Tafuri does) proceeds backward to show the impossibility of founding systems of thought. This parallel with Adorno is explored by Fredric Jameson. (Fredric Jameson, 'Architecture and the Critique of Ideology', *Architecture and Ideology*, ed. J. Ockman, Princeton, 1985, pp. 51-87).

3 See Manfredo Tafuri, *Histories and Theories of Architecture*, Harper and Row, New York, 1980, p. 64.

4 J. Derrida, 'Why Peter Eisenman Writes Such Good Books', pp. 99-105, *Restructuring Architectural Theory*, 1989. Bernard Tschumi Cinemagram Folie le Parc de la Villette, Princeton, 1987. Introductions to 'deconstructivism' are: Johnson and Wigley *Deconstructivist Architecture*, MOMA 1988, *Architectural Design*, Vol 59 No. 3/4 1988 'Deconstruction in Architecture' and C. Norris and A. Benjamin *What is Deconstruction*.

5 Fredric Jameson, 'Architecture and the Critique of Ideology', *op. cit.*, pp. 69-72.

6 Manfredo Tafuri, 'Lettura del Testo e Pratiche Discorsive', p. 37. Il Dispositivo Foucault, M. Cacciari, F. Rella, M. Tafuri, G. Teyssot, CLUVA Venezia, 1977, pp. 37-45. Thanks to Waddick Doyle who translated the article, and to the University of Queensland Department of Architecture Theory Reading Group who commissioned it. 'Lettura del Testo' is a brief, and

individualistic account of Foucault's thought on language and power which Tafuri claims are interconnected to a degree not understood by Foucault. The title translates as 'Textual Reading and Discursive Practice'.

7 Manfred Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, 1987. p. 5.

8 *ibid.*, p. 13.

9 *ibid.*, p. 14.

10 See Jeff Minson's 'Strategies for Socialists?', *Economy and Society*, vol.9 no.1, pp. 1-43

11 Manfred Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

12 Mary McLeod, 'Architecture and Politics in the Regan Era: From Post-Modernism to Deconstructivism', *Assemblage* no.8, pp. 23-59.

13 Manfred Tafuri, 'Lettura del Testo', p. 44.

14 Such an account of Foucault means holding, as many do, that the discourse and the non-discursive form opposed general realms. If this is the case it severely limits the application of Foucault's analysis to architecture. I am more persuaded by the interpretation of Deleuze, that the visible, and the sayable are formed into separate realms by discourse. (Gilles Deleuze, 'Strata or Historical Formations', *The Apprehension of Time*, Local Consumption, Sydney 1988, pp. 40-47.)

15 This situation is one which I studied with regard to picturesque cottages in my doctoral dissertation *The Ornamental Cottage, Landscape and Disgust*, Cambridge 1989, and reported briefly in my 'The Picturesque Cottage, Genre and Technique', *Southern Review*, vol. 22, no.3, 1989, pp. 301-314.

16 Manfred Tafuri, 'Lettura del Testo', p. 2, quoting Foucault, 'The Order of Discourse', p. 23 *Untying the Text*, ed. R.Young, Routledge, Kegan, Paul, 1981

17 Manfred Tafuri, 'Lettura del Testo', p. 40.

18 Heterotopia is a minor theoretical invention of Foucault's. Like utopia, heterotopia holds a general relation to all other places. Utopias might be models or critiques premised on their fictional nature, but heterotopias, such as monasteries and brothels exist in the real space of the world contesting its order. Foucault mentions heterotopia in *The Order of Things*, Tavistock, 1970, pp. xv-xviii, and in 'Of Other Spaces', *Diactrics*, vol.16, no.1, 1986, pp. 22-27. There are substantial differences between the two uses. Tafuri's interest in heterotopia is most apparent in 'Ceci n'est pas une ville', *Lotus International* 13, but his description of the concept is unlike either of Foucault's, although not as wayward as D.Pophyrion's in *Sources of Modern Eclecticism*, London, 1982.

19 Tafuri in 'Lettura del Testo', uses as examples of Foucault's reading his analysis of Magritte's *This is not a Pipe*, in the book of that name, *Art Quantum*, 1983, and his reading of Velasquez' *Las Meninas*, from *The Order of Things*, *op cit.*

20 *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, 1997. p. 13.

21 *ibid.*, p. 6. Tafuri also claims that Foucault's *The Order of Things* traces the 'rupture' between signifier and signified ('Lettura del Testo', p. 40) in the 'Classical Age'. This is incorrect. *The Order of Things* takes a two-part sign to be a rupture in a renaissance conception of a ternary sign.

22 Manfred Tafuri, 'Lettura del Testo', p. 44.

23 Harries, *Bavarian Rococo Church*, Yale University Press 1983, and more recently 'Representation and Re-presentation in Architecture', *Via* no.9, 'Representation' 1988. Perez-Gomez, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science*, MIT 1983. Although a more explicit and extreme argument is that of Dalibor Vesely in 'Architecture and the Crisis of Representation' *A.A. Files* no.8, pp. 21-38. Hans Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis: The Lost Centre*, Henry Regnery Co, Chicago, 1958.

24 'Lettura del Testo', p. 44.

25 Manfred Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, *op cit.*, p. 20

26 Not according to Joseph Rykwert from whose 'Inheritance or Tradition' I take this Albertian example. 'Leon Battista Alberti', *A.D. Profiles* 21, *Architectural Design*, Vol.49, no.4-5, 1979.